

How to Keep an Alien, Irish Arts Center, New York — review
Sonya Kelly's one-woman show about a cross-border love affair is hilarious
and touching



Sonya Kelly in 'How to Keep an Alien' © Ger Holland

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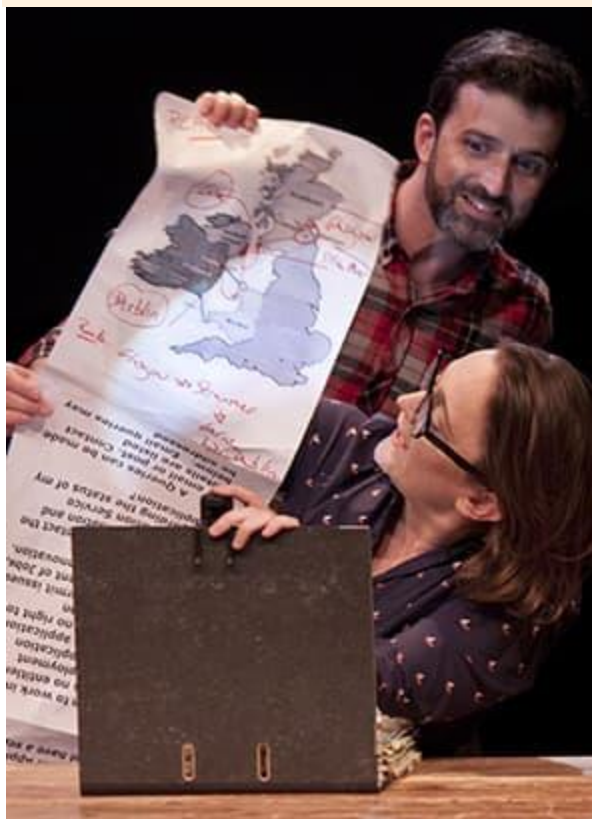
by: **Max McGuinness**

Love knows no bounds. Try telling that to the chap at border security. Cheap flights have made international romances ever more common, but stringent immigration rules mean that passion often ends up outrunning the length of one's visa.

It's a familiar conundrum, and a reliable source of romcom fodder, which Sonya Kelly invests with wit and originality in her one-woman show *How to Keep an Alien* (while Paul Curley provides an occasional foil as the onstage stage manager). First performed at the Dublin Fringe Festival in 2014, *Alien* recounts the mostly true story of Kelly's relationship with "Kate from Queensland", met while both were "rehearsing a Russian play with English accents in an Irish castle". It was, says Kelly, like plunging into "a giant dopamine Jacuzzi with serotonin bath salts".

Such turns of phrase and Kelly's self-deprecating style make this a consistently hilarious performance, which also displays considerable emotional depth while sending up the boisterous conventions of stand-up comedy. The ending in particular, which brings together audio recordings from the couple's family and friends, has a poignancy reminiscent of the final scene in *Cinema Paradiso* when decades' worth of censored kisses flood on to the screen.

An additional counterpoint emerges in the form of fictional letters attributed to Kate's own Irish ancestor who emigrated to Australia during the 19th century. It's a reminder that emigration used to be — and for many remains — a matter of life and death rather than love and paperwork. A grumpy immigration officer with cheeks “like two sides of bacon” similarly accosts them: “Are there bullets whizzin' over yer heads? No. Is it chicken wire for walls yiz have? No.”



The strange familiarity of Irish bureaucracy is a constant theme here, as is the wide-eyed infatuation felt by certain foreigners for a country dismissed by Kelly as a “concave tip of a rule-bending economic wormhole full of sheep”. And yet *Alien* attests the transformation of Irish society, which has gone from quasi-theocracy to legalising marriage equality by popular vote within a single generation. Homosexuality has become so normal that the word “gay” is never even mentioned here.



To October 1, irishartscenter.org

Sonya Kelly with Paul Curley in 'How to Keep an Alien'